

Whose business is it?

It was painful to watch RoweCom/Faxon unravel. Late in December, just as everyone's thoughts were turning to the holidays, messages of alarm started to show up on various discussion lists—rumors that Faxon had not paid publishers, was not going to pay publishers, might be going out of business. Soon the trickle of messages became a flood, and librarians who had been looking forward to a few days off to spend with friends and family were instead frantically trying to figure out what the status of their renewal orders actually was and trying to imagine how they were going to tell their bosses that tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars had been lost. Rumors circulated that EBSCO would buy or that Swets Blackwell would buy. Librarians hoped for a white knight who would somehow make them whole.

Publishers, by and large, were quicker to understand that no one was going to make them whole. They hoped for a deal that would at least minimize their losses. Many publishers announced that they would continue to fill subscriptions, at least for a period of time, while events unfolded.

As I write this, EBSCO is in the final stages of acquiring RoweCom's worldwide operations. Libraries and publishers are trying to decide whether to sign on to the deal. However it finally ends up, it is clear that both the publishers and the libraries involved will take some losses.

Coincidental to this unfolding drama, in December and January, I was focusing on publishing issues from a very different angle, as a member of the newly created library advisory board for the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM). NEJM had run afoul of librarians two years before, when they first announced that institutional subscribers to the journal would be able to provide electronic access from five designated workstations per subscription held (this was lat-

er modified slightly to allow for password access for those institutions where Internet protocol [IP] addresses were dynamically assigned and designating specific workstations was impractical). To librarians, such a scheme appeared to be archaic and foolish, and they were vocal in expressing their dismay.

The individuals in NEJM's publishing group were surprised at the reaction. They had not paid much attention to libraries in the past. Their subscription base is overwhelmingly comprised of individuals. They were shocked to find that all of these nice librarians were suddenly so angry with them. But they listened. At MLA '02 in Dallas, they held a number of sessions with librarians to try to better understand the issues from the librarians' side and, in the late fall of 2002, formed a library advisory board. The first meeting was held in Boston in late January 2003, as the Faxon/RoweCom debacle continued its errant spin.*

At that meeting, we spent quite a bit of time hearing from NEJM representatives about the business issues that they face. They talked to us about circulation patterns and revenue sources and the differences between the domestic and overseas markets. They previewed some of the features they would like to be able to offer in the online version, and they spoke with great pride and almost missionary zeal about the role of NEJM in the advance-

ment of medicine. They presented the general outline of what they were considering as an institutional licensing plan, and there was a vigorous discussion.

While the final details of that licensing plan are not yet clear, what is clear is that it will take librarians' concerns into account better than many of the institutional licenses that we have been exposed to over the last few years. NEJM is taking the trouble to find out what those concerns are, to learn about how the world looks from the library side, and to try to understand the priorities and issues that we face.

Would that we librarians were doing the same as we look at publishers and subscription agents.

It is certain that for many institutions, the license offered by NEJM will cost many times what a current institutional subscription to the print does. It is even more certain that this will result in hysterical cries of price gouging from librarians, who will wring their hands at the awfulness of publishers and their venal, mercenary behavior. This will happen because far too many librarians do not understand the business issues that publishers face and do not seem to have much interest in learning. It is a simple axiom that publishers are bad and that they always charge too much and that they are out to take advantage of libraries.

The majority of librarians that I know have always recoiled against thinking of what they do in business terms. I think that this is gradually changing, but, for many, it is only with regret. We feel that we are tainted in some way, when we start to think in commercial terms. I like to think that this is because of the high idealism that librarians bring to their work, and I agree that we need to struggle hard to maintain that high idealism.

Still, the fact remains, our libraries *are* businesses. We buy and sell and commit funds and enter into business relationships. If we are to be responsible stewards of the re-

* As of spring, 2003, the members of the advisory board are: Philip Davis, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Jon Eldredge, AHIP, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; Rick Forsman, AHIP, University of Colorado, Denver; Ruth Holst, AHIP, University of Illinois at Chicago; Susan Schweinsberg Long, AHIP, Virginia Mason Medical Center, Seattle; Elizabeth Lorbeer, Rush Presbyterian Hospital, Chicago; Judith Messerle, AHIP, Harvard Medical School, Boston; T. Scott Plutchak, AHIP, University of Alabama at Birmingham; and Britain Roth, AHIP, Geisinger Health Systems, Danville, PA.

sources of our institutions, we must have a clear understanding of what those business relationships entail.

I remember some years ago, speaking with a newly minted doctoral graduate in library and information science from a good library school. During the course of the conversation, it became clear that he had only the very vaguest notion of what a subscription agent actually did. And I thought about my own library school education and could not recall being taught much about such subjects there either. We had a management class, but it was theory and principles. Until I took my first associate director job, I had never seen an example of a library budget.

My former head of systems says that he has always been convinced that the journal purchasing business has got to be corrupt. True, he is a cynic to begin with, but the notion that we send large sums of money off to an intermediary some six to eighteen months before we expect to receive the product, and that we then rely, without any kind of a binding contract, on that intermediary to make the appropriate arrangements with a multitude of individual suppliers in a timely and efficient fashion, goes against every principle of accounts payable and receivable that he knows. Most institutions have very strict rules to ensure that either you do not pay for something until you have it in hand or that you have very specific contractual language binding both parties to certain standards of performance. The only time, it seems, that those rules go out the window, is when the librarian puts through a purchase order to send off a huge check to a subscription agent.

One result of the RoweCom collapse is that it may be more difficult to operate that way. Purchasing agents in institutions that have been burned are going to insist on more accountability and better checks and balances. This is probably a good thing.

But another result *should* be a far greater degree of attention paid by librarians to the business practices

of the companies that we work with. How many of you reading this actually know how the money flows once you send it to the subscription agent? Where does the agent's profit actually come from? How is the service charge actually calculated? What, in fact, are you actually paying for? And what guarantees do you have that you are going to get what you paid for?

Similarly, how aware are you of the economic pressures faced by publishers? Sure, Elsevier Science may be running a 30% profit margin, but, in most of the publishing business, the margin is 5% or less. For a small society publisher, a precipitous drop in subscriptions caused by the introduction of easily available electronic access could mean ruin. We grumble among ourselves that some of the decisions publishers make must be intended to make our lives miserable, so perverse do some of those decisions seem. But our failure to understand the real pressures and issues that publishers face leads to our incomprehension.

Certainly, many publishers that we deal with are equally uncomprehending about the ways that libraries operate, about the realities of our budget battles in our own institutions, and about the timeframes in which we need to make purchasing decisions. This is part of what has made the *NEJM* advisory board experience so fascinating. It reveals, in microcosm, how much librarians and publishers need to learn from each other.

The unease that we feel about thinking about our libraries as businesses seems to stem from a concern that we will become focused on costs at the expense of service. But there is no reason that this should be so. To think of the library as a business does indeed require keeping a relentless eye on the bottom line—but *our* bottom line *is* service. To think of the library as a business is to question every decision that we make and to ask ourselves is this the best use I can make of this resource—whether that resource be money, or people, or space, or creativity. Will this

course of action improve my bottom line—that is, my ability to provide exemplary service to my clientele—or am I wasting resources by not making the most efficient use of them?

To think in this way also means taking a hard-headed, realistic look at the environment in which we operate and striving to understand the motivations and pressures felt by the individuals we deal with. Publishers make rational decisions based on what they perceive as their own best interest. One's personal relationship with a valued customer service representative is not necessarily an indicator of the health of that representative's company. Ambitious young faculty members will publish in Elsevier journals as long as those journals are perceived to be the highest quality journals in their fields. Deans and hospital chief executive officers will allocate resources to those parts of their organizations that appear to be most likely to promote the overall goals and financial health of the enterprise. When someone makes a decision that strikes you as crazy, it is most likely that you are not looking hard enough to see the world from their side. You may not agree with the decision, but unless you understand it, you cannot deal with the consequences of it effectively.

None of this implies that we put our devotion to service in jeopardy. Indeed, it seems to me to be the only way that we can be sure to meet the highest standards of our profession. Only when we have a clear understanding of what motivates the decisions of all of those that we interact with, can we be sure that our own decisions are the best that they can be.

For most of us, our libraries are a passion. We would not be doing this otherwise. We put up with a lot because we believe that we are pursuing a noble calling and contributing to the greater good. I believe that, and it helps me get through some difficult days. But it *is* still a business. It is *your* business.

Change in copyright policy

At their January 2003 meeting, the members of the MLA Board of Directors approved a motion to revise the copyright policy for the *Journal of the Medical Library Association (JMLA)*. As is the case with most scholarly journals, the *JMLA* routinely required authors to sign a form transferring all rights to the association. Late last summer, that policy was challenged by several MLA members who pointed out that it was somewhat contradictory that at a time when we, as a profession, were urging the scholars that we serve to pay more attention to preserving their own copyrights, we, as a professional society, were still demanding that our own authors give up those rights.

During the fall, then, a new copyright policy was devised that acknowledges that *JMLA* authors retain the rights to their work. MLA is given the right of first publication and the right to republish the work in whatever fashion the *JMLA* may be republished in the future (for example, as part of an aggregated database). Individuals wishing to make copies of articles for educational, nonprofit purposes are still entitled to. But the authors are now free to make whatever further use of their work they wish, and, if some other person or entity wants to republish or make some other use of the work in the future, they need to get those permissions directly from the authors.

I am very grateful to the members of the *JMLA* editorial board,

the chair and incoming chair of the publications committee, and MLA headquarters staff who helped craft the new policy. And I am especially grateful to those MLA members who challenged us to put our policy where our principles are. The new policy is posted on MLANET[†] and takes effect with this issue.

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[†] The copyright policy may be viewed at <http://www.mlanet.org/publications/jmla/>